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Technologies of intuition (ISBN 9780920397435)
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#### Citation Details

##### Citation for the version of the work held in 'OpenAIR@RGU':

KOKOLI, A. M., 2006. Susan Hiller's paraconceptualism. Available from <i>OpenAIR@RGU</i> . [online]. Available from: <a href="http://openair.rgu.ac.uk">http://openair.rgu.ac.uk</a>
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##### Citation for the publisher's version:

KOKOLI, A. M., 2006. Susan Hiller's paraconceptualism. In: J. FISHER, ed. Technologies of intuition. Toronto: YYZ Books/MAWA/DisplayCult. Pp. 119-139.
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# Susan Hiller's Paraconceptualism

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[In: Jennifer Fisher (ed.), *Technologies of Intuition* (Toronto: YYZ Books/ MAWA/ DisplayCult, 2006), pp. 119-139. For illustrations please refer to the print version.]

"‘I like,’ she said, ‘anything that flickers.’" Those are the words of Angela Carter, transmitted by her literary executor Susannah Clapp, in the preface to the posthumously published collection of short stories *American Ghosts and Old World Wonders*.<sup>1</sup> The statement seems a particularly apt introduction to Susan Hiller's oeuvre, and in particular the automatic writing project, installation and artist's book *Sisters of Menon* (1972/1979). Exploring the margins of representability, pushing beyond the limits and limitations of retinality, lending a voice to the dead or incorporating oral accounts of anonymous strangers, all conjure the ghostly quality that is typical of both the subject matter and the means and materials of Hiller's art. Her oeuvre is engaged in an on-going dialogue with psychoanalysis, whose archaeological investigations into the unconscious it mimics in its attempt to unearth censored strata of cultural signification. Yet in mimicry, according to Walter Benjamin, the copy does not leave its "original" unaffected.<sup>2</sup> Writing on Hiller's work with materials from the Freud Museum, Denise Robinson draws attention to the willful blurring of archive and debris (an assortment of uncategorized objects from Freud's possessions is displayed in custom-made archaeological collecting boxes), the highly invested institutionalized space of the museum and the private sphere of domesticity (the Freud Museum in London is housed in Sigmund Freud's last residence).<sup>3</sup> Such blurring is typical of Hiller's overall treatment of psychoanalysis in both her art and writing: recalling and challenging its precarious positioning as science on which Freud insisted strongly, Hiller strives to restore psychoanalysis to its darker, devalued, repressed roots in myth and storytelling, and even animism and the paranormal. In his essay "The 'Uncanny'," Freud concedes that, in its efforts to lay bare the unspoken and (almost) unspeakable, psychoanalysis may well be viewed by some as unsettling and "uncanny" in its own right, by association.<sup>4</sup> Thus, psychoanalysis itself also appears to possess the flickering quality favoured by Carter and systematically cultivated by Hiller.

Hiller's concern with the cultural and optical unconscious ventures into the territory of the culturally and intellectually abject. Hiller's mindful collection and integration into her work of materials including Punch and Judy performances (*An Entertainment*, 1990), narratives of UFO sightings sourced from the Internet (*Witness*,

2000), near-death experiences in a variety of languages (Clinic, 2004), present an affront to current aesthetic and intellectual sensibilities. Hiller's resistance to value judgement in dealing with "commonly discarded [and] distrusted" material,<sup>5</sup> often combined with active audience participation, renders her work difficult to assimilate for the art critical establishment. This difficulty, however, also highlights the radical potential of the culturally abject. Unlike the bodily abject, so easily accommodated in the popular media landscape, for example in the horror film genre<sup>6</sup> or, more recently, in primetime broadcasts of plastic surgery, the culturally abject has possibly inherited the avant-gardist promise of the abject in its literary evocations, as was envisaged by Kristeva in Powers of Horror. Originating in a distinctly feminist engagement with visual culture, Hiller's work unearths the repressed permeability not of the fragile psychical entity of the body, but of other unstable yet prized constructs, such as rationality and consciousness, aesthetic value and artistic canons. Hiller refers to this precarious positioning of her oeuvre as "paraconceptual,"<sup>7</sup> just sideways of conceptualism and neighbouring the paranormal, a devalued site of culture where women and the feminine have been conversely privileged. Most interestingly, in the hybrid field of "paraconceptualism," neither conceptualism nor the paranormal are left intact: as in the case of the abject, the prefix "para-" symbolizes the force of contamination through a proximity so great that it threatens the soundness of all boundaries.

Second-wave feminism has both tapped into the paranormal and raised awareness of its essentialist perils. Women's affinity to the "beyond" is too comfortably reducible to a confirmation and enforcement of their marginality, even if it also serves to register feminine (sometimes even feminist) dissent.<sup>8</sup> Without scholarly poststructuralist support, anti-rationalism and irrationality have been too easy to conflate, sometimes prompting writers and artists to supplement their practice with pre-emptively corrective commentaries to ward off essentialist misreadings. Hiller resists this trend: although vocal and extremely articulate, she is self-consciously light-handed in her treatment of her own work, careful not to correct extant interpretations or appear to be providing the definitive one. The closest she comes to intervening in her work's reception is by protesting that her fascinating albeit underestimated subject matter attracts more critical attention than the material and conceptual means by which it is transformed.<sup>9</sup> The prefix 'para-' designates an arena of both danger and possibility that, to complicate matters further, threatens to lure the spectator/reader astray, to deceive her into sidestepping the issue at hand. "Paraconceptualism," therefore, is an uncanny practice par excellence, not simply because of its adjacency to the paranormal, but thanks to its evocation of the repressed periphery of culture.<sup>10</sup>

In this chapter, I will not be privileging subject over form, matter over material. Rather, I will be exploring a space of in-betweenness, beyond and adjacent to the works themselves. I will attempt to locate Hiller's practice in a feminist tradition of interventions in visual culture, and in culture through the visual. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, I will try to show how Hiller's work challenges and expands orthodox or stable definitions of feminist art history, theory and practice. My interpretation of Sisters of Menon unfolds against the backdrop of feminist readings of Hiller's production of the seventies and eighties, while being indebted to them.<sup>11</sup> Such tensions are typical of the last thirty-five years and are most manifest in the life and work of many feminist artists who started their career in the late sixties and early seventies, and art historians who were either involved in the project of overhauling art history or have been working with the tools that feminist art theory developed. Both groups have been negotiating the space between the search for another subject and the destitution of the subject. Something of this tension is also implicit in the label "identity politics," which in spite of being severely, probably irredeemably, disrupted by psychoanalysis, is still valuable as a marker of difference – not sexual difference per se, but the aesthetic, countercultural and critical difference of feminism's historical interventions in the arts. Rosemary Betterton's reading of Sisters of Menon acknowledges its allusion to the historical second-wave "sisterhood": the work is embedded in the sexual politics of the 1970s and anticipates feminist philosophy of the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Feminist theory after the second wave has been faced with a negotiation between different historical moments and their respective agendas, a negotiation which often recedes into a yet unsettled tension between radical identity politics and flexible models of identification, in which the subject is almost emptied out. There is a recognition, in Hiller's work, that this tension needs to be at least tolerated, if not sustained, rather than resolved. Hiller resists the facile assertion "the object of art is without subject"<sup>13</sup> to reveal a crowded space where the authorial "I" is muffled by the voices from the other side/ the side of the other.

The second space of in-betweenness that will be examined and which is the starting point of my particular interpretation of Sisters of Menon, is between Hiller's visual work and a not-quite supplemental, on-going commentary on it, as well as on wider issues of visual culture, theory, and practice. Although classified as a visual artist and having abandoned the scholarly methods and aims of social anthropology in which she had been trained, Hiller's work consists of both in equal measure. Critics, including Hiller herself, have often noted the continuities between Hiller the anthropologist and Hiller the artist, especially in terms of the preparatory work – the "research stage" of art practice where, as

Denise Robinson puts it, "the collector shadows the artist"<sup>14</sup> continuously. In this shadow cast on a chosen enterprise, Hiller may be positioned as an intermediary -- the learned go-between in the midst of different genres and discourses -- and as a medium for the culturally repressed. Considered in this manner, Hiller's body of work makes a compelling argument against metalanguage, staging non-hierarchical encounters between theory and practice, art, anthropology, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Sisters of Menon exemplifies this interdiscursive interstice in its structure: the work consists of a collection of twenty pages of automatic writing, typed transcripts, and four Notes, each of which reflects on the work in a different style and tone, while also forming part of it. Sisters of Menon was completed in 1979, when Hiller undertook the transcription of the retrieved automatic scripts and produced the accompanying Notes. The work thus spans a crucial decade for feminist art practice and extends into the 1980s, when Sisters of Menon was published as an artist's book in 1983 by Gimpel Fils. It has been exhibited as an installation, where the scripts were arranged in cruciform, with the Notes and transcripts positioned at the edges of the horizontal axis. Although clearly numbered and arranged in sequence, the cruciform shape of the installation discourages linear reading; what is more, not all installments are equally visible to the spectator without having to crouch down or stand on her toes, thus necessitating the physical collaboration of the audience, as Hiller's works often do.

The shape of the cross is repeated in the background of the typed transcripts and appears again as a grapheme within the automatic script. All automatically produced marks that do not correspond with letters are replaced in the transcripts by dashes, apart from the encircled cross or "X," which is copied intact. Hiller observes that this symbol provides a link between the work and the location where the scripts were made. The encircled cross is a Cathar symbol while the French village of Loupien, where she was staying at the time, is situated in a Cathar region: "Cathars followed a Gnostic tradition, which leads to interesting ideas about religion and gender."<sup>15</sup> Gnosticism consists of a wide, loosely associated group of mystical teachings and sects, which were sometimes perceived as a rival to orthodox Christianity and "which professed to offer 'gnosis,' saving knowledge or enlightenment, conveyed in various myths which sought to explain the origin of the world and of the human soul and the destiny of the latter."<sup>16</sup> Certain Gnostic sects "speak of the feminine element in the divine, celebrat[ing] God as Father and Mother."<sup>17</sup> Salvaged in spite of their illegibility, the crosses may also be considered a sympathetic nod to the makeshift signature of the illiterate. In the book, the Notes also "frame" the automatic scripts, with the first two placed at the beginning and the rest at the end. Notes I serves as an

introduction to the work, explaining its method (automatic writing combined with gestural automatism, resulting in hybrid letter-drawings) and its history: the scripts were produced "automatically," in a state of altered consciousness (which, however, as Hiller insists, "didn't seem freaky")<sup>18</sup> during the artist's stay in Loupien. The second page elaborates on significant details that begin to erode the notion of subjectivity, questioning the division between subject and object. The scripts had been lost and only "re-appeared ... almost exactly seven years after their transmission."<sup>19</sup> They were not rediscovered, but found their way back from oblivion "automatically," as if of their own accord.

The Greek word "automatos" contains the meaning "self-acting,"<sup>20</sup> with the "self" being, however, devoid of consciousness. This is where the Freudian uncanniness of automata and automatism lies, and not in the observer's intellectual uncertainty as to whether something is animate or inanimate, dead or alive, as Ernst Jentsch proposed.<sup>21</sup> The handwriting and "voice" in which the inscriptions were made are not Hiller's usual, characteristic style, even though her hands did the writing. When used, the possessive pronoun ("my hands") is suspended in quotation marks. Notes III includes a schematic "analysis of the relationship between Automatism and Creativity" along gender lines, with scientists, poets and artists being gendered male, corresponding to the female-identified mediums and lunatics respectively. Typical of the feminist epistemological and art historical critiques of its time, the partition is challenged in the work itself, where the dividing lines are crossed often and nonchalantly. Whereas the automatic scripts stand for the artist's participation in an altered state of consciousness, the Notes that frame it reveal a systematic and informed reflection on automatism and the work itself: Sisters of Menon proposes that the two sets of positions (scientist and artist vs. medium and lunatic) need not be incommensurable but can be occupied alternatively and at will, while at the same time acknowledging that social and cultural conditions rob certain social groups of such flexibility. Notes IV appears to have been created for the book, being absent from the installation, and highlights issues that came into prominence in Hiller's oeuvre since the completion of Sisters of Menon in 1979. The work, that may, or may not, be read as "primitive" self-expression or an "'occult' phenomenon," poses and responds to the question: "Who is this one?"<sup>22</sup> Already embroiled in the dissolution of subject positions, Hiller tackles this question in the first person singular, which is however again provisional, suspended in quotation marks: "'I' feel more like a series of activities than an impermeable, corporeal unit ... or rather, 'I' AM NOT A CONTAINER."<sup>23</sup>

Approaching Sisters of Menon from the seemingly explanatory periphery of the Notes towards its more equivocal depths, the

viewer performs a privileged reading/viewing of the work, with the name "Menon" as its undecipherable navel. "Menon" remains ungendered and is never identified apart from through undefinable shifters (i.e., personal pronouns but also terms such as "here/there," "now/ then," that only acquire meaning in the context of a known situation) and self-referential predicates:

1. -----/ who is this one/ I am this one/ Menon is
2. Menon is this one/ you are this one/

Shifting shifters highlight the democratizing aspect of automatism, spelled out by Surrealism. Hiller has described her art practice as populist, in spite of its embeddedness in critical theory; her art remains simultaneously approachable and capable of transforming the abstract models with which it engages, because it is not tied "illustrationally to theory."<sup>24</sup> Notes IV, the last page of the book, explicitly addresses issues of duration and endings. It fades into sentence fragments buffered by ellipses, seemingly left to be completed (or not) by the reader: "..... widest possible social implications ... art history ... accessible to all ....."

Menon is introduced only relationally and, crucially, not in terms of either patrilineality or matrilineality but laterally, on an equal plane, along sibling lines:

3. I am the sister of Menon/ I am your sister/ the sister of -- everyone's sister/ I am Menon's sister
18. we are the sisters of Menon/ everyone is the sister/ everyone is the sister/ love oh the sisters/

Lucy Lippard has noted that "Menon" is an anagram of "nomen," Latin for name,<sup>25</sup> while Hiller has playfully suggested "no men";<sup>26</sup> the automatic message indeed reinforces the vacuity of "the Name of the Father" not by excluding men (which, strictly speaking, it doesn't do and which alone would have been inconsequential), but by questioning the symbolic function of paternity and filiality. In this kinship network, there is no marriage, no exchange of women and thus no economy, either in social terms or on the level of the Symbolic Order.<sup>27</sup>

9. Menon/ we three sisters are your sister/ this is the nothing that we are/
10. the riddle is the sister of the zero/ we are the mother
11. of men/ we are the sister of men/ o the sisters

Automatic transmission and the reception of automatically produced texts break with rationalist codes of interpretation to create a semiotic inflation where seemingly contradictory propositions are

valid at the same time. Lacan ties kinship and especially the exchange of women to language: both are “imperative for the group in [their] forms, but unconscious in [their] structure.”<sup>28</sup> Kinship lays down not only the social but also the symbolic law. On the level of kinship, such semiotic inflation becomes almost incestuous: we/you/I are both the mother and the sister of men (or of Menon: “we are the sister of men/o the sisters”). Already a few clues in Sisters of Menon allude to the Oedipus myth as known via Sophocles and, of course, Freud. Like Sisters of Menon that is spun off from a question about identity to a mystery surrounding familial provenance, Oedipus Rex starts as a virtual whodunit, whose driving question (“Who murdered the late King?”) soon becomes “Who is Oedipus?,” and is then promptly translated into: ‘Whose son is he?’<sup>29</sup>

The strongest allusion to Oedipus, however, comes in the last instalment of the automatic script:

20. -----/ we are your sisters from THEBES/ thebes<sup>30</sup>

Hiller draws the attention of the reader/viewer to the last word of the automatic scripts at the very beginning, suggesting that it “provides a clue, for the ancient Greeks (I’m told) had only one term for writing and drawing.”<sup>31</sup> Liddell and Scott confirm this double signification of “grapho” and list numerous other meanings, including – in an uncanny evocation of Oedipus’ detective family romance – that of being “indicted.”<sup>32</sup> The name of the city is first written in capitals and then repeated in lower scale, as if in two different registers, with the final “s” of the second inscription drawn out beyond the edge of the page, towards the body doing the writing. Finally we are given a hint, if not exactly to the identity of Menon, then to the context and scope of this investigation and this clue is the reiterated name of a location, conflated with questions of identity: “‘I’ am a location.”<sup>33</sup>

Shoshana Felman calls the Oedipus myth the “specimen story of psychoanalysis,” arguing that Freud’s rendition of it in The Interpretation of Dreams not only forms the foundation of his theory of sexualization and sexuality, but that it also textually enacts the compulsion to repeat, and presents the death drive as the generative force in psychoanalysis.<sup>34</sup> This centrality of the death drive may be interpreted in different ways. A fundamental characteristic of Hiller’s work is what she refers to as “the scary element,”<sup>35</sup> usually cast in terms of the uncanny: that which should have remained hidden but is uncovered, the return of the repressed that is revealed to be already familiar: <sup>36</sup> “MESSAGES SUPPRESSED BY THE SELF DO NOT CEASE TO EXIST. MESSAGES SUPPRESSED BY THE CULTURE DO NOT CEASE TO EXIST.”<sup>37</sup> The work of automatic mark-making is no mere retrieval of the repressed from



the unconscious but a journey into the unknown that is known all too well, which is the very definition of the uncanny.<sup>38</sup> If what is at stake in the "unheimliche," this familiar and – in its exemplary form – familial and domestic unhomely, is ultimately not the castration complex but the death drive, then every return, which is a return home, is by definition deathbound.

The interstitial focus of my interpretation of Sisters of Menon is mirrored disjunctively in the doubling of the place-name "Thebes." Roszika Parker's 1983 interview with Hiller goes very much against the grain of automatism and the numerous interpretations of Hiller's work, to argue that Sisters of Menon not only invites interpretation but "insist[s] that we decipher" it. Hiller concedes to an extent by offering a possible interpretation: Sisters of Menon "reformulates the encounter between the Sphinx and Oedipus."<sup>39</sup> Confusingly, in other discussions of the work, Oedipus is often elided. In an interview with Stuart Morgan, Hiller identifies Thebes without hesitation as an ancient Egyptian burial ground: "[it] is of course the necropolis in Egypt which undoubtedly I had already read about."<sup>40</sup> In the Egyptian Thebes, now Luxor, there is a precinct dedicated to Memnon, son of Eos (Dawn), a Greek mythological hero whose name is only a letter away from Menon. This similarity is left without comment, while Hiller mentions her interest in hieroglyphs, secret languages and the precarious link between voice and subjectivity. Legend has it that the Northern statue of the two "Colossi of Memnon" flanking the gateway of the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III used to emit a high note at daybreak in salutation of the Greek hero's mother. In the interview, Hiller slips from the locus of the Oedipal drama to the Egyptian necropolis, from Oedipus's arrogant eloquence to the inarticulate lament of a son for his mother, unearthing a near-homonym between the mythical hero and the "obscure navel" of Sisters of Menon. The interstice between the two Thebes partakes in the uncanny ambiguity of the voice: both the "medium of the subject's transparent self-presence" and the "opaque stain" that undermines it.<sup>41</sup>

In Oedipus Philosopher, Jean-Joseph Goux proposes that the formulation of the Oedipus complex in psychoanalysis is constitutive of the "conscious/unconscious cleavage."<sup>42</sup> Even more significantly, the impact of the Oedipean drama is symptomatic of "the mode of subjectivity that characterizes Cartesian societies,"<sup>43</sup> a mode of subjectivity that is assumed, interrogated and to a degree problematized by psychoanalysis, but which pre-exists and survives it. Goux argues that ultimately Freudian psychoanalysis "lacks the articulated conception of what may signify a surpassing of the Oedipus complex,"<sup>44</sup> and I think that Hiller implies the same. In rearticulating the Oedipean drama as the Oedipus complex, Freud censors the flickering quality of psychoanalysis and attempts to

violently resolve its fecund ambivalence between science and art, psychology and magic. The cleavage between the conscious and the unconscious is no mere partition, but institutes a range of hierarchical relations, placing heteronormative genitality above diffuse sexuality (the Foucauldian “polymorphous perversity”), sacrificing the pre-Oedipal affinity with the maternal body for the sake of networks of kinship, privileging logos over the unrepresentable and the paranormal. The “mode of subjectivity” that is ushered in by the Greek Oedipus and that is envisaged as the outcome of a resolved Oedipus complex comes at the price of personal and political repression. Sisters of Menon rethinks the encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx by giving voice to a different kind of disarticulated subjectivity. It does so significantly by reminding the audience that there is more than one Thebes, by prying open the lag between the Greek and the older Egyptian city, the locus of Oedipus’s intellectual victory and the burial site that gets buried – repressed – by what Oedipus and his warped family romance come to stand for. In order for the specimen story to function as such, it has to be forgotten in practice:<sup>45</sup> Sisters of Menon only de-Oedipalizes subjectivity through the calculated forgetfulness that it prompts and in retelling the story with a difference. In tracing the Oedipean “autocentered” subject in the Western philosophical tradition, Goux pays special attention to Hegel, who is credited with the transformation of Oedipus into “a shadowless, fully inaugural figure”<sup>46</sup> and of his encounter with the Sphinx into “the primitive scene of philosophy.”<sup>47</sup> Hegel collapses the Egyptian with the Greek Sphinx, and casts the encounter as a confrontation between two different regimes of the symbolic, out of which the rational hero emerges triumphant, but having sacrificed otherness: ‘The light of consciousness, which is consciousness of self, obliterates all enigmatic alterity, suppressing the dimension of the unconscious’.<sup>48</sup> The birth of Western philosophy coincides with “the exit of Egypt.”<sup>49</sup> Sisters of Menon not only effects a return to the past and an exit from Europe, but juxtaposes the two Thebes, commemorating their weighty difference and rewriting the conclusion of Oedipean drama. The implications of this piece are not only feminist but also psychoanalytic, philosophical and postcolonial.

Feminist readings of Hiller’s work tend to highlight its critique of subjectivity from the point of view of the feminine. I have striven to show that its challenges are far more far-reaching, or perhaps that through rethinking her self as an ambiguously positioned subject (a woman, a foreigner, Jewish), Hiller addresses clusters of cultural issues with multiple and unexpected ramifications. Her “improper”<sup>50</sup> use of self-portraiture would make an apposite closing for the present discussion, especially as it elaborates on insights

gained through the kind of automatic mark-making inaugurated by Sisters of Menon.

Hiller's work Sometimes I think I'm a Verb Instead of a Pronoun (1981-82), if not exactly a straight-forward exercise in self-portraiture, is unequivocally described as an autobiographical work. The work belongs to a series of photomat self-portraits produced mainly in the early 1980s, consisting of blown up passport pictures partially covered by automatic script and paint. Sometimes I Think I'm a Verb Instead of a Pronoun consists of twelve panels, each comprising eight frames (two foursomes of photomat pictures) that have been written and painted on and consequently rephotographed. The conventions of identification photography are thwarted on two levels: the photographed subject either averts her gaze or, as in this work, presents body parts other than the face to the camera, while the photographic print is purposely veiled in writing and colour. The automatism of the illegible script is relayed by the absence of a seeing, conscious agent behind the camera of the photomat. Hiller relates, "Clearly what's happening here has got to do with the question of, say, presence or absence of the female subject, the female person who is the subject of these works, namely me."<sup>51</sup> Hiller identifies the title as a quotation by American General and President Ulysses S. Grant. Once again, the question of self-identity passes through the other in a most pronounced way: the feminist artist encounters a dead father of a nation, not simply a sovereign figure but a symbol of sovereignty.

Yet Grant carves out an odd patriarchal figure. Emerging from the American Civil War as hero, his presidency is customarily described in terms of confusion, inefficiency and impotence. His biography on the White House website claims that he "provided neither vigour nor reform" and "seemed bewildered.... One visitor to the White House noted 'a puzzled pathos, as of a man with a problem before him of which he does not understand the terms.'"<sup>52</sup> Following the trajectory from the Greek to the Egyptian Thebes, from Oedipus to Memnon and then to President Grant, we also track another transition. Hiller's automatic script morphs from relative intelligibility to a primordial cryptolinguistic mark-making whose meaning may be "read" as iconic (as shapes that may or may not evoke objects, as clouds do when observed persistently and at leisure) but which is primarily indexical. That is to say, it conveys nothing other than the act of mark-making.<sup>53</sup> The index does not only sidestep language but, in doing so, disrupts the authorial function of the subject and dispels its authoritative aura. Ulysses Grant, named after another mythological fortune-seeker, becomes the anti-Oedipus, marking the point of dissolution of the Western subject just like Oedipus marked its emergence. A year before his death, Grant was diagnosed with throat cancer that resulted in the

complete loss of his voice. Reduced to communicating principally through writing, he wrote in a note to his physician:

I do not sleep though I sometimes doze a little. If up I am talked to and my efforts to answer cause pain. The fact is I think I am a verb instead of a personal pronoun. A verb is anything that signifies to be; to do; or to suffer. I signify all three.<sup>54</sup>

On the brink of death, the index overtakes the symbol (the intelligible sign), the body overwhelms the subject, verbs take over from pronouns. In Sometimes I Think I'm a Verb Instead of a Pronoun, sensations speak louder than words – the subject is flesh again, beneath and beyond language. Just as the script devolves into indecipherability, the body parts replacing the face in the photomat frames now remain just that, fragmented, barely identifiable, not yet stapled together by the little other (objet petit a) of the mirror stage.<sup>55</sup> More than any work from Hiller's series of photomat self-portraits, Sometimes I Think I'm a Verb Instead of a Pronoun celebrates the sensual pleasures of painting with thick, textured layers of colour – pleasures that were prohibited in orthodox feminist art practice, especially of the post-minimalist conceptualist tradition in which Hiller is usually (albeit not entirely comfortably) classified: "The Law of the Mother" was "Thou shalt not paint," as Judith Mastai whimsically put it.<sup>56</sup>

This is not another clichéd narrative of the biological birth-death division, nor the spiritual or mythological birth-death-rebirth cycle. Hiller's quest for the repressed magic of psychoanalytic intuition runs parallel to the investigation of Jean Laplanche. In Life and Death in Psychoanalysis, Laplanche looks into the "transformation into something different" of "the biological polarity of life and death ...when it is transposed to the level of the psychical apparatus."<sup>57</sup> Her automatic script, whether legible or illegible, is not simply a Laplanchian "enigmatic signifier," the signifier de-signified, bereft of its signified but still able to signify to.<sup>58</sup> Rather it marks the intertextual point where meaningful and resonant mythological, aesthetic and theoretical allusions converge. Thus, the ethical imperative of psychoanalysis articulated by Freud in "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death," as "if you would endure life, be prepared for death" and elaborated in his correspondence (what Laplanche calls his "'condolence' letters"),<sup>59</sup> is spun into a cluster of different, less coherent – or rather "fruitfully incoherent"<sup>60</sup> – propositions: listen, recover, complicate, recirculate; complete forgetting is impossible; to remember is to always also mourn (and vice versa); there is, fortunately, more than one Thebes.

Jean Fisher claims that the motif of the “suspension of the rational subject ... restores the transmissibility of culture” by allowing one “to grasp the traumatic void of meaning that haunts our memories of the everyday.”<sup>61</sup> Hiller’s most recent work exemplifies this expert mediation entailed in the conveyance of the unsayable: The J-Street Project consists of a film and photographic series documenting public spaces with Jewish names around Germany. The premise and its execution seem deliberately – misleadingly – straightforward. The juxtaposition of these disparate, ordinary environments is burdened by the lack of commentary at least as much as it is by the guilty elimination of the culture and the people after which the streets were named. Their elliptical character is disturbing: “I always wanted to ‘catch’ people in the gaps between discourses and the gaps between frames.”<sup>62</sup> In mapping out the shadows of the familiar, it is unclear whether it is bridges or traps that Hiller sets up. Questions of and around identity are posed only to be obscured and infinitely deferred. Sisters of Menon can be read as an exercise in cartography sending its spectator/reader on a wild goose chase. The most persistent participants may discover new and instructive trajectories, traversing the Mediterranean southwards, crossing between mythology and psychoanalysis, unearthing the forgotten, intuitive aspects of the Freudian episteme, and returning to an altered Oedipean configuration, where the Sphinx is let be.

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<sup>1</sup> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Robinson, ‘...scarce stains the dust...’, in James Lingwood (ed.), *Susan Hiller: Recall: Selected Works, 1969-2004* (Gateshead: Baltic, 2004), 101.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Hiller’s work with, on, and in the Freud Museum consists of three incarnations: *At the Freud Museum*, exhibited at the Freud Museum in London (1994); the book *After the Freud Museum* (London: Book Works, 1995); and subsequent versions of the exhibition, including that in Tate Modern, London, under the title *From the Freud Museum* (Robinson, 99).

<sup>4</sup> ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919), *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library: 14 (London: Penguin, 1990), 366.

<sup>5</sup> James Lingwood, ‘Introduction’, in Lingwood (ed.), *Susan Hiller: Recall*, 10

<sup>6</sup> In *The Monstrous Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1993), Barbara Creed argues that although the intrinsic femininity of abjection may be seen as potentially radicalizing, its most accessible manifestations are neutralized in the horror film, a fundamentally conservative genre that plays at disrupting the psychical order only to promptly restore and reaffirm it.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Hiller, ‘Women, Language and Truth’ (1977), in *Thinking About Art: Conversations with Susan Hiller*, ed. Barbara Einzig (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), 43-44.

<sup>8</sup> One of the most fascinating discussions of these problems is found in Catherine Clément and Hélène Cixous, *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), where the feminist merits and perils of the figures of the witch and the hysteric are debated.

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<sup>9</sup> Hiller, *Susan Hiller: Recall; Selected Works, 1969-2004* (DVD), dir. Gary Malkin (Gateshead: Baltic, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Samuel Weber, 'The Sideshow, or: Remarks on a Canny Moment', *MLN* 88 (1973): 1102-1133.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Annette Van den Bosch, 'Susan Hiller: Resisting Representation', *Artscribe* 46 (May/July 1985): 44-48; Susan Butler, 'Subject-to-Change', *Women's Art Magazine: Photography Issue* 59 (1994): 23-26; Lucy Lippard, 'Out of Bounds', in Lippard, *Susan Hiller: Out of Bounds* (London: ICA, 1986), n.p.; Penelope Kenrick, 'Susan Hiller, Automatic Writing and Images of Self', in Gabrielle Griffin (ed.), *Difference in View: Women and Modernism* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994), 108-129; Marsha Meskimmon, *The Art of Reflection: Women Artists' Self-Portraiture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Scarlet Press, 1996), 100-101.

<sup>12</sup> Betterton, 'Susan Hiller's Painted Works: bodies, aesthetics and feminism', in Lingwood, 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> Statement made in reference to the automatic strand of Hiller's work, Stella Santacatterina, 'Anamorphosis of the Gaze', in Lingwood, 122.

<sup>14</sup> Robinson, '...scarce stains the dust...', in Lingwood, 102.

<sup>15</sup> Stuart Morgan, 'Beyond Control: An Interview with Susan Hiller', in Fiona Bradley et al., *Susan Hiller* (Liverpool: Tate Gallery Liverpool, 1996), 42.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher Stead, 'Gnosticism', in E. Craig (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge), <http://www.rep.routledge.com/article/K028>, accessed on 26 May 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospel* (London: Vintage, 1979), xxxv.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>19</sup> Hiller, 'Notes II', *Sisters of Menon* (London: Coracle Press for Gimpel Fils, 1983), n.p.

<sup>20</sup> H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940).

<sup>21</sup> E. A. Jentsch, 'On the Psychology of the Uncanny', in Sarah Wood (ed.), *Home and Family*, special issue on the uncanny by *Angelaki*, 2:1 (1995): 7-16. In 'The "Uncanny"', Freud is in dialogue with Jentsch's essay which, in spite of serious criticisms, he considers to be the only other noteworthy discussion of the uncanny.

<sup>22</sup> Hiller, 'Notes IV', *Sisters of Menon*, n.p.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Hiller, 'Theory and Art' (1988), *Thinking About Art*, 105, emphasis in the original.

<sup>25</sup> Lippard, n.p.

<sup>26</sup> Morgan, 42.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Luce Irigaray, 'Commodities among themselves', in *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 192-197.

<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, 'Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), 72.

<sup>29</sup> Sophocles' play is available in many different editions and translations into English: see, e.g. 'Oedipus the King', in Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles, introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (London: Penguin, 1984). A brief synopsis of the Oedipus myth is necessary for following the argument: Laius, King of Thebes, received the omen that he was to be killed by his yet unborn offspring. When his wife Jocasta gave birth to a son, the infant was handed over to a shepherd with the order to be taken out of the city and executed. The shepherd, however, took pity on the child and spared his life: he was given the name Oedipus due to his swollen ankles, which had been tied together too tightly. Adopted by another royal family, as a young man Oedipus decides to consult the oracles for guidance; to his horror, it is prophesied that he

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would kill his father and marry his mother. Unaware of his adoption, Oedipus flees his family home to avoid fulfilling his destiny. Tragically, he meets his birth father Laius on the road and kills him in an altercation. Approaching Thebes, Oedipus comes across the Sphinx, a monster, half-woman half-lion, who poses riddles and slays anyone who cannot solve them. Oedipus is successful, thus bringing about the Sphinx's demise (the answer to the riddle is, interestingly, 'man'). To reward him, the people of Thebes offer him the crown and the newly widowed queen Jocasta in marriage. After some years, another plague strikes the city and it is prophesied that only the expulsion of the killer of Laius will put an end to it. Sophocles' play starts at the moment when King Oedipus sets out to discover the identity of the killer. In the course of his investigation, the identity of the killer, his own, and his provenance are all simultaneously revealed: the killer is no other than himself; he is the son of Laius and of the woman he had made his wife. In shock and despair, Jocasta commits suicide, while Oedipus blinds himself and is exiled from the city.

<sup>30</sup> I'm correcting Hiller's transcript '----- / we are your sisters from Thebes/ Thebes' (*Sisters of Menon*, n.p.), which conceals the different spellings of the name of the city in the automatic script.

<sup>31</sup> Hiller, 'Notes I', *Sisters of Menon*, n.p.

<sup>32</sup> See Liddell and Scott.

<sup>33</sup> Hiller (interview with Rozsika Parker), 'Looking at New Work' (1984), *Thinking About Art*, 51.

<sup>34</sup> Felman, 'Beyond Oedipus: The Specimen Story of Psychoanalysis', in Robert Con Davis (ed.), *Lacan and Narration: The Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 1021-1053.

<sup>35</sup> *Susan Hiller: Recall; Selected Works, 1969-2004* (DVD).

<sup>36</sup> '[...] it's the disturbance that works cause in some individuals that mark them as odd or uncanny. And at the same time, the works make many other people feel familiar, comfortable, welcomed, relieved.' Hiller, 'The Word and the Dream' (1993), *Thinking About Art*, 123.

<sup>37</sup> Hiller, 'Notes I', n.p., capitals in the original.

<sup>38</sup> '[T]he unheimlich is what was once heimisch, familiar; the prefix "un" [...] is the token of repression.' Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', 368.

<sup>39</sup> 'Looking at New Work', 51.

<sup>40</sup> Morgan, 42.

<sup>41</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* (London: Verso, 1996), 147.

<sup>42</sup> Goux, *Oedipus Philosopher*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 201.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Felman, 1050-1.

<sup>46</sup> Goux, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>50</sup> I am using the term 'improper' as the opposite of Hélène Cixous' 'propre', usually translated into English as 'selfsame'. In French the term suggests property, appropriation, propriety, and cleanliness. See Cixous, 'Sorties', *The Newly Born Woman*, 63-132.

<sup>51</sup> Hiller, 'Portrait of the Artist as a Photomat', *Thinking About Art*, 63.

<sup>52</sup> The White House Biography of Ulysses S. Grant, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/ug18.html>, accessed on 22 July 2004.

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<sup>53</sup> C. S. Peirce, 'The Icon, Index and Symbol', in *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. II, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge MA: Belknap, 1990), 156-173.

<sup>54</sup> Cited in Thomas E. Sebeok, *I Think I Am a Verb: More Contributions to the Doctrine of Signs* (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1986), 2.

<sup>55</sup> In 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the *I*' (*Écrits*, 1-8), Lacan pins the transition from a fragmented body image to a visual and spatial perception of the body as (a) whole, on the infant's misrecognition of her reflection as firstly an other and subsequently herself. The illusion of wholeness, which is constitutive of the subject as such, is enabled by the inclusion of a bit of the other – the objet petit a – into the core of the subject. Lacan refused to straightforwardly define the 'objet petit a' and insisted that it remained untranslated. Alan Sheridan proposes that its untranslatability confers to it 'the status of an algebraic sign' [Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Vintage, 1998), 282]; I would also suggest that its untranslatability suggests the magical faculties of the word as invocation.

<sup>56</sup> Mastai, 'Thou Shalt Not... The Law of the Mother', in *Women and Paint* (Saskatoon: Mendel Art Gallery, 1995), 8-14.

<sup>57</sup> Jean Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 7.

<sup>58</sup> Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*, trans. David Macey (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 45.

<sup>59</sup> *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 6.

<sup>60</sup> 'Fruitful incoherence' is a phrase often used by the artist to describe her practice and approach to both art and theory, Hiller, 'Looking at New Work', 53. Cf. Gavin Jantjes et al. (eds.), *A Fruitful Incoherence: Dialogues with Artists on Internationalism* (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1998).

<sup>61</sup> Fisher, 'Before Testimony', in Lingwood, 83.

<sup>62</sup> Hiller cited in Robinson, 103.